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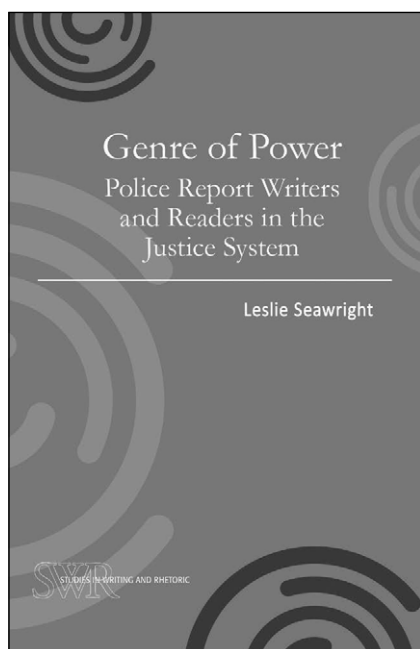


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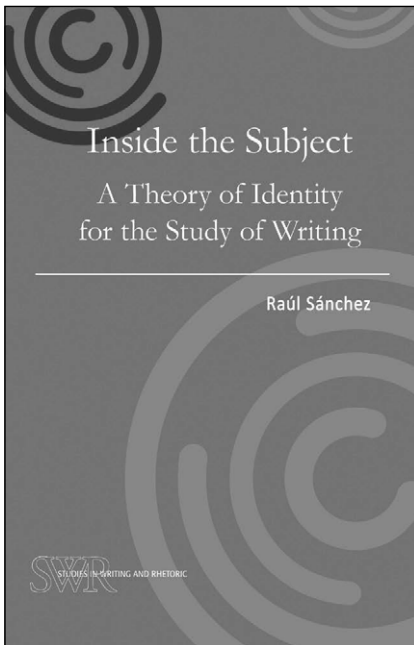
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“Share Your Awesome Time with Others”: Interrogating Privilege and Identification in the Study-Abroad Blog

Kathryn Johnson Gindlesparger

Let's be honest—you're probably going to have an awesome time. You might want to share your awesome time with others—family and friends at home, strangers on the internet, and maybe even your future self.

—International Student Exchange Programs,
“How to Write a Study Abroad Blog: 5 Tips for Success”

Sometimes, tragic masterpieces can only be constructed through art forms like music. Frau Brenner painted me that picture today and in turn left me with a greater personal connection and understanding of the human tragedy known as the Holocaust.

—Eric L., “Painting with Words”

How to Write a Study Abroad Blog: 5 Tips for Success,” an advice post on blogging published by the International Student Exchange Programs (ISEP), an independent study-abroad planning agency, advises students studying abroad to “share your awesome time with others” by maintaining a personal blog that documents highlights of the travel experience. According to ISEP, a student writer will create personal cultural capital by documenting their “awesome” travel experience on a blog, just as the epigraph suggests. And yet, as the blog post by Eric L. in this essay’s epigraph demonstrates, study abroad is not necessarily all “awesome,” all the time. Often students struggle with the scope of the experience, a conflict that leaves traces

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on students' public travel writing. As teachers and scholars then, we should ask ourselves what happens when a student's time abroad is more complicated than just "awesome"? What happens if and when a student's time abroad prompts deep, justifiably uncomfortable and life-changing reflection, as it should? How do our students' experiences collide with the genre expectations of student travel blogs and how do we help students navigate the ethics of representation—of themselves and the cultures they encounter—when they present themselves in the public genre of the travel blog?

Ethics are of concern to composition, as John Duffy has argued, because "every time we write, we propose a relationship with others" (229). As English begins to "go public," as Thomas Miller suggests (32), these relationships move farther afield from the classroom and offer new opportunities and challenges for teachers and students. To this end, empathy has become a subject of study in literature (Jurecic; Keen; Kulbaga), in rhetoric and the teaching of writing (Jack and Applebaum; Leake), and in some cases has even served as the basis for educational imperatives or formalized learning outcomes ("Crucible Moment"; Kuh). But these discussions of empathy and identification have not yet appeared explicitly in writing practices and pedagogy embedded within study abroad. Similarly, while issues of identification, privilege, and empathy have been approached within the broader literature on study abroad (Zemach-Bersin, "Selling", "Entitled"; Aktas et al.; Shultz), they have not yet been examined as a result of or as related to the teaching and/or practice of student writing. To address this deficit, this essay examines how the genre of the study-abroad blog encourages students to use the misfortune of others to explore their own privilege.

This inquiry is grounded within a multidisciplinary general education course, Contemporary Europe, a 2012 class whose subject matter foregrounded those tensions that may go unnoticed in other courses that may be less inclusive of internationally traumatic subject matter. As such, our three-week travel experience to Germany, Austria, and Spain took us to sites of historical and current trauma: the former Stasi prison that is now the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial, the Mauthausen-Gusen Concentration Camp in Linz, Austria, and the Islamski Kulturni Centar Bosnjaka, a youth center for Bosnian refugees in Berlin. As a required component of this course, thirteen first- and second-year students wrote daily travel reflections posted on a blog intended for their families and others at home to read. In this venue, students' desire to understand what it was like to live through the historical traumas encountered and see those traumas through the lens of their own experience formed a rhetorical pattern, one that helps us understand student responses to this type of uncomfortable material and so provides an opportunity to improve pedagogical strategies to meet student needs. As illustrated in the epigraph from Eric, students repeat-

edly attempt to identify with the victims of the Holocaust, the Stasi prison, and the Bosnian genocide from similarity; in short, by attempting to imagine what it would have been like for oneself.¹ But lacking experience with trauma of this scale, the students reached for any similar lived experience, however distant or superficial. The result, as Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes note, can be “appropriative and projective” (15). The students’ identification from similarity, combined with the genre convention of “sharing your awesome time with others,” can lead to unethical representation in student travel writing while abroad. To describe and address this ethical question, this essay first examines the genre of the student-written study-abroad blog and then shows how meeting the genre conventions of the study-abroad blog can put students in ethically compromising positions. I then turn to examples from three students in this class. Each of these students not only permitted me to use their writing in this essay, but also gave an interview in which they reflected on their writing process five years after the class. I ultimately argue that in order to complicate the genre and the ideologies in which the genre is rooted, faculty members should encourage students to engage in more “unsettled” thinking about their travel experiences.

STUDY-ABROAD BLOGS: BUYING AND SELLING FOREIGN STUDY AS PERSONAL EDIFICATION

The ethical dilemma of student travel writing has been exacerbated by the explosion of study abroad initiatives. Intersecting with this uptick in popularity, the study abroad experience itself has changed dramatically in the past several decades, shifting its focus from long-term international experiences, such as a semester abroad, to short courses that mimic the time frame of a vacation experience. As described by the Institute for International Education, such short courses now predominate—with roughly 60 percent of students who study abroad doing so for a period of less than eight weeks. Of this 60 percent, 15 percent are abroad for less than two weeks (“Duration”). While the decreased cost and increased flexibility of short courses make study abroad accessible to more students, the truncated time frame presents pedagogical challenges for faculty, one of which is how to encourage meaningful engagement with other cultures.

While shorter classes may challenge faculty members, they nevertheless serve institutional goals. Because study abroad can be a revenue-generating venture, institutions can be well served by increasing enrollments in such programs. One way to do this is by showcasing the cultural capital gained by going abroad. Thus while one purpose of the blogs is to summarize the travel for far-flung friends and family, yet another purpose is to market the study-abroad experience itself. This exigency is rooted in the very way these experiences are

marketed, for, as Talya Zemach-Bersin describes in “Selling the World: Study Abroad Marketing and the Privatization of Global Citizenship,” study-abroad promotional materials show how “students understand study abroad as a commodity, an entitlement, and a non-academic adventure” (303). This first-world perspective on international education influences the audience expectations for writing produced by students studying abroad: audiences expect to read about narrators understanding a new culture, but only as a means to an end of “personal advancement” and “adventure” that leads to greater cultural capital (305). Zemach-Bersin argues that the promotional materials send the message that the American students are consumers of the exotic in that

the desires and bodies of Americans are positioned as important and valuable, while the countries and the people being visited are depicted as backdrops, props, and products that can be purchased for the students’ personal growth and development. (305)

Student bloggers’ reflections of these genre features are troubling but also show that the authors are astute rhetors. The authors anticipate that their audiences will want to know how they are different from the people and countries they are visiting, how they have used these people and countries to learn more about themselves and, ultimately, that they have been changed for the better thanks to the “backdrops, props, and products” (305) purchased via their international study. Students are encouraged to showcase their empathetic exchanges with poor, passive natives to an always-watching audience of friends and family back home.² And, as many composition instructors teach our students, writers can only persuade their audiences what they are willing to hear (Porter). Given these multiple constraints on student authors, the writing emerging from the study-abroad scene raises the question, what pedagogical values solicit these overidentified responses from students? Because genres organize ideologies into action (C. Miller), the conventions of the blogs are symptomatic of larger forces at work. The study-abroad blog is not just a problem of genre but a problem of ideology. While the industry of study abroad has adapted to student needs, particularly regarding access to travel, it also uses the personal edification that has become expected during a student’s time abroad to advance the industry’s commercial interests.

**“SHARE YOUR AWESOME TIME WITH OTHERS”:
THE GENRE OF THE STUDY-ABROAD BLOG**

Given these commonalities among student blog exigencies, it is unsurprising that a genre might emerge. The commonalities of the surface features and

rhetorical strategies that students use to address these challenges call into reality a privileged perspective on study abroad. As Carolyn Miller has argued, genres represent “typified rhetorical actions” that are organized around social behaviors (151). In the case of the blogs, the typified action is the reframing of unsettling experience(s) as a re-inscription of one’s own power. The repetition of this typified rhetorical action teaches students “what ends [they] have” (157) or, what responses to trauma are allowable. The students’ performance of the genre conventions creates the expectation that study abroad is a venture that reinforces one’s own values and previous life experience. As the genre conventions are rhetorical and thus intertwined with exigency and motivation, the typified rhetorical action can be used, as Miller ultimately suggests, as “an index to cultural patterns” (165). That the rhetorical patterns can be traced back to ideological roots demonstrates that the authors’ overidentification is ultimately a problem of cultural perspective separate from any one student’s rhetorical performance. The “Tips” sheet examined here solicits commercially acceptable material from students and articulates how writers should respond to their travel experience in line with these ideologies.

Here I examine an advice column from the independent study-abroad planning agency International Student Exchange Programs (ISEP), “How To Write a Study Abroad Blog: 5 Tips For Success.” Such tip sheets are a micro-genre themselves, for this is but one of the many how-to writing guides that appear in a search for “how to write a study abroad blog.” While the material offered across these guides is substantially similar, ISEP’s guide seems particularly well suited to this inquiry because the organization lists diversity as one of its values, suggesting that the published materials should demonstrate an awareness of cultural engagement and privilege. Though the stated values suggest that the organization is interested in ethical exchange of cultural values, behaviors, and ideas (*Our Community*), “How to Write” encourages writing that avoids discussions of trauma, adheres to a conventional five-paragraph-theme format featuring rising action and a neat conclusion, and integrates the author’s own experience with the practices observed abroad. This type of advice is prevalent across institutional contexts, as many institutions pay for memberships with planning organizations like ISEP, which offer services such as enrollment and transfer coordination, on-site housing and registration management, and orientations (“Member Benefits”). To coax American students into the study-abroad process, ISEP sponsors a blogroll of writing from undergraduate students; they also solicit writing to add to this blogroll. Partnerships with numerous institutions present the readership potential for individual posts, and thus the conventions of study-abroad blogging, to go viral.³ Similar organizations that liaise with university offices of study abroad, to varying degrees of commercialization, are the

Council of International Educational Exchange (CIEE), the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS), and the Academic Programs International (API).⁴

ISEP's "How to Write" both instructs students in the genre conventions of study-abroad blogging and also encourages them to submit to ISEP's blogroll. The post provides five tips for student blog writers to follow: Write, Reflect on your experience, Share photos, Keep it short, and Be honest. Yet the rhetorical strategies offered as tips show that one perhaps unintended, but very much present, expectation is for authors to illustrate the power and privilege that study abroad provides participants. "How to Write" also forecasts the positive experience of study abroad in the rationale for writing a blog: "Let's be honest—you're probably going to have an awesome time. You might want to share your awesome time with others—family and friends at home, strangers on the internet, and maybe even your future self."

The individual tips then support the assumption of this awesome time by contributing to a genre that creates such an outcome. The "Keep it short" section, for example, advises writers not to drone on, but to tighten up experiences and situate them as part of a curated narrative that emphasizes action; literally, "keep your content to what is most exciting and noteworthy." The example given shows that excitement is accomplished by able-bodied individuals acting on a world that is theirs to conquer:

"Today I woke up and then I went to the store and then I went to class and then I went home and then I did homework and then I ate dinner and then I watched TV and then I went to sleep"
isn't *nearly* as compelling as,
"Today in class, we rappelled down a ledge."
BAM ("How to Write").

The sentence-level craft is arguably what makes the poor example so un compelling. But the choice of the "compelling" activity—rappelling down a ledge—also reinforces Zemach-Bersin's notion that study abroad positions students as conquerors of a passive world; the world is their playground. Rappelling, taken up individually as a sport, is expensive and equipment-intensive. The reference anticipates an audience that understands the subtext that rappelling is an exciting thing one does on vacation, and that by extension, study abroad is similarly a vacation-oriented experience rather than a time to be critically aware of difference and inequality. The fixed notion of mundane activities that are done at home ("went to the store and went to class") vs. exciting activities that are done abroad ("rappelled down a ledge") avoids topics that are neither fun nor exciting. Moreover, the simple one-sentence story, "Today in class, we rappelled down a ledge," implies a conventional story structure, as it is a story about a discrete

event. It is not, “Today in class, I contemplated my own complicity in the racist history of Germany.” The simple past, subject-verb-object structure of “We rappelled down a ledge” implies there will be a beginning, middle, and end, and that there will be some resolution to the rising action. This conventional structure is not as germane to complicated reflection about highly sensitive topics.

Even as the “Keep[ing] it short” section recommends simplifying the day’s activity, the “Reflect on your own experiences” section further instructs students to narrow what they see using the lens of their own lived experiences. It suggests, “How were the day’s activities different from what would have happened at home?” and “Instead of just documenting your adventures, ask yourself what surprised you or what you learned.” Certainly, these questions are not all bad, for they prompt the connecting, evaluative work that is typical in reflective writing. What *is* dangerous about these questions from the ISEP page is that they are positioned as rhetorical tools that can be applied to any situation. Asking “How is this different from home?” in situations where students are already in positions of power enhances the students’ power; students are encouraged to apply superficial exoticism or merely summarize how the foreign context does or doesn’t stack up to their expectations instead of analyzing the cultural contexts around differences and similarities. The end of “How to Write” provides links to sample blogs that further contribute to a fixed separation between home and abroad and avoidance of trauma. A link titled “Renee’s hilarious accounts of life in Costa Rica” intimates that there will be no downer discussions about current events or social concerns. A link titled “Alicia’s gorgeous photo blog of Thailand and her travels throughout Asia” directs readers to a blog that skirts any ugly topics.⁵ Instead of focusing on how to ethically manage identification with other cultures—which would encourage potential student authors to enact the organization’s core values of diversity, immersion, and integration—the links demonstrate that study abroad is a vacation-oriented excursion where students are rewarded for shining their own privilege onto rhetors with less agency.

To be clear, I am not singling out “How to Write” because I find it egregious. Rather, it is noteworthy because the exigency it establishes is endemic in blog prompts—including my own. The fixed separation between home and abroad, for example, also appeared on the assignment sheet I cowrote for my own study-abroad course, which prompts students to “offer the blog’s audience back home a basic awareness of where we went, what we did, and how [an] event fits into the course” (“Germany 2012”). It was an unstated expectation that blogs would be tidy, brief, and somewhat sanitized, just like the samples included here. Upon reflection, I realize the intellectual freedom that the assignment sheet from my own course attempted to give students in fact allowed them, by default, to reinscribe their own values as part of the writing process. All student writing

in the Contemporary Europe course, including both daily reflective blogs and longer research essays, was posted to the course blog, which served as a site of communication for friends and family and also as a repository for student work. Students wrote nearly every day we were abroad, completing thirteen blogs each over the twenty-day period. While the prompt asked for between 300 and 500 words, the content of the reflective work was left largely up to the students: the assignment sheet was written for all of the blogs, not individual sites. Thus a student might respond to the prompt with a reflection written about Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin or a beach day in Barcelona. Students were instructed to “focus on just one thing / event that impacted you during the day” and “do far more than provide your emotional reaction to what you experienced.” While ISEP’s writing guide explicitly asks students to contribute to genre conventions that position them as purveyors of cultural capital, the assignment sheet I helped create ultimately did little to prevent students from making the same choices. By attending to the dynamic established in these blog prompts and in the students’ writing itself, however, we can help students meet their rhetorical challenges when abroad.

**STUDENT VOICES THEN AND NOW:
REFLECTING ON MOMENTS OF (OVER)IDENTIFICATION**

The rhetorical patterns elicited by both the ISEP tips and my own assignment prompt were certainly visible in my students’ writing—and in their experiences of the course. While the students interviewed for this project all did well in the course, they also felt conflicted about what they saw as their own inability to convey the complicated nature of the study-abroad experience. They understandably struggled to make sense of the trauma they witnessed and reached for their own lived experiences for comparison. Even though these students had the best intentions and used the tools of critical analysis they had in order to explore their environments and experiences, their identification with victims ended up obscuring the severity of the original trauma. For example, student Alyssa writes in her blog about our visit to the Mauthausen–Gusen Concentration Camp that the barracks reminded her of her own military job, ultimately concluding in her 2012 blog post that the visit to the prison camp “helped me learn more about myself, hopefully helping me to become a better well-rounded person when I come home” (“Photographic Memory”). Krista Ratcliffe refers to such moments as overidentification because the student is “so implicated within an idea or action that [s/he] can only imagine confessional responses that preclude cultural/ systemic analysis” (138). To readers, the moment may appear insensitive, naïve, or ethnocentric. Taken as a site of analysis, however, it is an opportunity

to “propose a new relationship with others” (Duffy). Students may invite this discussion of genre, as those who I interviewed reported that they often did not know what to say in response to the historical trauma they saw while abroad. When explicitly asked to respond on the blog as a part of the course, this group of white, mostly middle-class, Christian and secular students drew on their own experiences as frames of reference for understanding events like the Holocaust. Students even noted their frustration with their own methods of representation, as Alyssa ultimately lamented in our interview, “It’s actually very disappointing to me that I wrote like that.” While studying a small group of students from a single class does not allow for generalizations about identification or writing abroad, examining these moments of overidentification opens a conversation about how to encourage students to write about the unsettlement that travel may prompt.

Eric: “Tying a bow” on a Holocaust Narrative

Eric’s story illustrates the complex reactions that students feel about their study-abroad experiences, both in the moment and upon later reflection. A rising sophomore majoring in graphic design when he went on the Germany trip, Eric said in his interview that he had “never left the east coast” before the study abroad experience and was “hoping to learn more about the world.” His parents had not traveled extensively either and were excited to read about his experiences. As was the case with several of his classmates, Eric felt pressure to write blogs that would, simultaneously, accurately reflect the profound depth of emotion he experienced, summarize the day’s activities for his audience at home, and display a level of content proficiency that would satisfy the professors. As if this cognitive load were not heavy enough, Eric also noted in our interview that his own experience with films and literature about the Holocaust obscured his understanding of the trauma he encountered. Reflecting this disjuncture, one of Eric’s blog posts describes a meeting with Holocaust survivor Henny Brenner as an extension of these earlier encounters:

Sometimes, tragic masterpieces can only be constructed through other art forms like music. However, they often lend themselves to multiple interpretations which can be good sometimes but then there are other times where a specific picture must be painted. Frau Brenner painted me that picture today and in turn left me with a greater personal connection and understanding of the human tragedy known as the Holocaust. (“Painting With Words”)

Eric overidentifies Brenner’s life story as a “tragic masterpiece.” This moment is uncomfortable to read, as it diminishes what Brenner survived by positioning her life experience as entertainment for Eric’s gain. Even the semantics point to this conclusion: “Frau Brenner painted *me* that picture . . .” (emphasis

added). Eric defines the kind of art he prefers to learn from (“a specific picture”) and then suggests that Frau Brenner did that for him. Following the conventions of the blogs, Eric refocuses Brenner’s trauma on how it made him a better person; there is a sense that her recounting of personal traumatic experience somehow meets his own personal needs. During our interview, Eric begins to unpack this paragraph by explaining why he chose to think about Brenner’s life story as a narrative he could evaluate for his own use:

Most of my exposure to the Holocaust came from movies and books. I’d seen the *Pianist*, and I’d read graphic novels like *Maus*, and books in elementary school like *Number the Stars*. It’s such a tough topic to talk about that I had to put it in the context of something that I was familiar with. I used what I’d known, or what I’d learned, as a means of breaking in to talking about it because it is something that’s very tough to talk about.

From Eric’s perspective, Frau Brenner’s presentation of her life story was another example of the Holocaust narratives he had grown up with. While the course syllabus gave Eric new narratives of the Holocaust to contextualize what he’d learned abroad, it was the readings from his childhood that stuck. Today, Eric bristles at his characterization in his blog post of Brenner’s story as a “tragic masterpiece.” In our interview, he reflected on the post, noting,

I’m a little frustrated that that’s how I approached it, saying that I thought I could only understand it through pieces of music or films I had watched. It just seems a little narrow minded. [. . .] I think I would stray away from tying a bow on it.

In our interview, Eric suggests that he needed a pathway in, and movies and books gave him that path. But he was caught in an ethically-compromising situation as a writer: being tasked with reflecting on a complex, traumatic situation, he relied on previous knowledge to make connections. Reading through the lens of overidentification, this previous knowledge obscured Eric’s ability to identify with Frau Brenner as a person who had an individual experience with the Holocaust, separate and distinct from the narratives presented in the literature Eric read in school. Eric’s comment about “tying a bow on it” also relates to ISEP’s advice to write briefly and about what is most exciting. The result is a truncated moment of identification that affirms Eric’s authority on a topic about which he has no personal experience.

Emily: Understanding the Nazi Perspective

Emily C. was also a rising sophomore when she took the study-abroad course and also had never been abroad before. In our interview, she said that her goal while writing the blog was to “capture everything that I was emotionally feeling

and everything that I was seeing there, so that now, going back a couple years later, I could feel that again. [The writing] was me showing how special the trip was to me.”

Emily’s post about our tour of Congress Hall, the stadium in Nuremberg that Adolf Hitler used for military assemblies, demonstrates the limited frames into which students must fit complex intellectual responses. Our guided tour of Congress Hall was haunting: the stadium is now overgrown with weeds, and flocks of birds inhabit the eaves. The students found the place eerie, and our morning there led to “What would I have done if . . .?” discussions. This question stem became a popular thinking tool on the trip, especially when encountering physical sites of trauma. In her post, Emily wondered, “What would I have done if I were a Nazi?” As a reader, I was surprised by how easily Emily seemed to put herself in that situation. She writes,

The Congress Hall totally brought me to the same mindset that I am sure the Nazi army felt at times, helpless. No one would ever take on such a power like that themselves, no matter what their view was. (“Intimidating Horseshoe”)

What sounds like overidentification is Emily’s confident claim that she understood what it felt like to be a part of the Nazi army: helpless. Of course, we don’t know this emotional attribution is accurate— they could have felt emboldened, excited, proud. In our interview, Emily dug into the overidentified stance and tried to understand what it was like to be a member of the Nazi army through the lens of her own values. She said:

I was [trying to] understand from their mindset, how does one live with themselves knowing they are causing this much pain in another group of people? I was trying to dive in and see: were [the Nazis] just trying to provide for their family? Were all of them really that bad, or were they just normal people [who] needed a job and needed to make money and just had to give in to the evils of the world in order to survive?

Emily views the Nazis from her perspective: she is someone trying to provide for her family herself, with a new job and new income. She extends the values of her day-to-day to the Nazis.

While I sympathize with and respect Emily’s attempt to understand the motivations of the individuals standing with the Nazi army in that stadium, the blog post and her reflection on the post find and replace the Nazi’s motivations with her own justification. The genre conventions dictate limited responses for Emily and demand that the complex intellectual task of trying to understand what could motivate Nazism must also be “exciting,” “awesome,” or at least show how she is bettered by reflection on the topic. To fit the conventions,

Emily implies that the Nazis must have had some positive qualities; she frames them as “normal people who needed to make money” and in doing so, shines a light on her own values.

Alyssa: Avoiding Emotion to Ensure Readability

Alyssa, a junior when she went on the study-abroad trip, reported in her interview that she intended her blog for readers who had never before been abroad. Her sentiments echo the other students who were writing for friends and family at home who had not traveled extensively. During the interview Alyssa also mentioned her lack of experience with blog writing, divulging, “I had no experience with blogs whatsoever. I didn’t really know how to write for a blog, or *what* to write.” This hesitant authorial stance results in an avoidance of risk at all costs in her blog writing.

Alyssa’s post about her visit to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp ranks among the strongest examples of overidentification in the students’ blogs and was actually the inciting incident for this project. On our blog, she related her own experience in ROTC basic training to the experience of the prisoners at the concentration camp. After touring the gas chamber and sleeping quarters at the concentration camp, she wrote:

The concentration camp makes me very speechless. As our tour guide was telling us the details of the daily life of the prisoners, I found myself strangely relating. They woke up at 4:45 AM, the same time that I woke up for basic. The layout of the barracks also reminded me of the barracks where I work, all the dorms in one place and all the kitchen/ laundry facilities in another. The gas chamber experience was something I could somewhat relate to. It just made me speechless to have those things in common, even though it was a completely different era and completely different reason. But I think having those similarities helped me to identify with the prisoners, so that I could really understand what was happening. (“Photographic Memory”)

Alyssa’s moment of overidentification on the blog, in which she asserts that her experiences in basic training give her insight into the experience of the gas chamber, obscures the distinct experiences of the prisoners. Further, the genre conventions prevent Alyssa from empathizing in a meaningful way. While she acknowledges the shared experience of waking up at the same time, she skips over the part that is most emotionally turbulent and difficult to navigate rhetorically: how this shared experience relates to her tour of the gas chamber. What leaves Alyssa “speechless” is her shared experience with the prisoners; left unstated is any number of deeply upsetting realizations that might spring from contemplating this shared experience. Instead of exploring these options, Alyssa tidies up her

reaction to the gas chamber and cites the perceived similarities as contributing to her own personal growth (“I could really understand what was happening”).

In leaving these difficult topics unexplored Alyssa increases the perceived readability of her text, according to the conventions of the blogging genre. During our interview, Alyssa critiqued her writing for not being a good “read.” Equating “good” with “entertaining” is exactly what “How to Write” advocates: make it sound exciting. The lack of excitement in her writing is indeed what Alyssa regrets. In our interview, she explains the overidentification as an attempt to make the post more readable and enjoyable, given she was attempting to write for readers who had never been abroad, let alone to a concentration camp. She says:

Making a connection to my experience, no matter what it was, makes for a better read. It makes it more personal. [But] there is a lack of emotion. I could have put so much emotion in this paragraph. I mean, I was in tears when we came out of the gas chamber. That experience was very humbling for me. So I don’t know why I didn’t write more about the emotional side of it.

In a manner akin to the “How to Write” recommendations, Alyssa tries to relate her own experiences to those of the prisoners. She seemingly responds to ISEP’s writing prompt: “How were the day’s activities different from what would have happened at home?” with a variation—what was similar. In trying to meet the expectations of her audience, Alyssa glosses over the horrific original event. Keeping her “content to what is most exciting and noteworthy” (“How to Write”), Alyssa avoids the complicated response to the gas chamber that surely would not fit neatly into a tidy blog post curated to share her “awesome” time with others.

RHETORICAL APPROACHES TO IDENTIFICATION

That students such as Eric, Emily, and Alyssa are genuine, caring, sympathetic people is part of the problem: they signed up for this study-abroad option knowing that they would tour World War II sites and that each day might be filled with awe but might not be “awesome.” Overidentification, thus, is not merely a rhetorical strategy for the morally complacent. At its foundation, overidentification is a symptom of a recognition of difference. One question, then, is how to use this symptom to re-examine the composing and reflective work students do abroad so that they may move beyond overidentification to more complex representations of their own subjectivity. The interviews suggest that students don’t want to engage deeply or meaningfully in trauma because these engagements may be uncomfortable, embarrassing, or call into question their social, cultural, or political values. For as Gail Ivy Berlin argued in the pages of this

journal, emotion in academic discussions of trauma “makes us uncomfortable, is somehow suspect” (398). Because the tools for literary analysis “block emotion,” and because emotion in an academic setting can be taboo, students disengage, thinking, “How could I possibly relate to this?” The genre conventions of the study-abroad blog emerge from writers’ potential discomfort, encouraging authors to avoid being unsettled by replacing undesirable human experience with their own evaluation of trauma or their own lived experience.⁶

Krista Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening clarifies the ways in which we understand student identification to function and so might offer alternate avenues of reflection. She argues that, unlike Burke’s concept of identification, difference must be a benefit to rhetorical exchange and that rhetors should “locate identification across commonalities and differences” (32). According to Ratcliffe, identifying over similarity can smooth over difference, leaving it out of identification entirely. Identifying from similarity is one of the genre conventions of the study-abroad blogs, and the students dutifully performed this convention. Yet, engaging and interrogating difference is how Ratcliffe suggests that learning happen “by listening to those who do not agree with us, provided the listening occurs in the context of ‘genuine conversation’ (Copeland), where there is a desire in all parties to move our understanding forward.” The genre of the study-abroad blog, which exhibits a systemic aversion to difference, prevents the students from processing their learning via “genuine conversation” (36). In some ways this overidentification is a problem of plenty: the students were earnestly trying to understand the painful experiences of others; they were eager to learn and used all of the tools at their disposal to do so. Yet their writing and interviews raise a difficult question: How should students be encouraged to engage in “genuine conversation” and, perhaps in doing so, welcome the discomfort that it might bring? Rather than couch their lack of ability to identify as failure, what if working through their own discomfort is the students’ end goal? The experience of their own discomfort resulting from an engagement with trauma could, in fact, help them identify the depth of difference and inequality they have seen. Dominick LaCapra’s concept of empathic unsettlement can serve as a framework for how to approach Ratcliffe’s “genuine conversation” pedagogically. Writing about literary and other representations of trauma, LaCapra offers,

Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement, which [. . .] poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility). (41)

Allowing oneself to be unsettled stops glib or “unearned” closure to representations of trauma. Empathic unsettlement may be a useful model in classroom settings where inequality is addressed, and it pushes back against the neat and tidy expectations of genres like the study-abroad blog. A discussion of allowing oneself to feel unsettled may have relieved Eric from putting “a bow” on Frau Brenner’s interview; it may have also pushed Alyssa to articulate her complex emotional response and Emily to reckon with the possibility that the Nazis standing in the stadium were motivated by hate. While unsettlement can be unpleasant, discomfort can be a transformative component of pedagogy.

**UNCOMFORTABLE BUT STILL “AWESOME”:
ENCOURAGING ETHICAL REPRESENTATION IN STUDY ABROAD**

Given the high stakes surrounding student representations of privilege while writing abroad, faculty members must be mindful about whether or how the writing they assign encourages students to embrace unsettlement. To correct the current genre conventions of the blogs, students need to be invited to share not only their “awesome time” with others, but also their discomfort and uncertainty—and in doing so, propose relationships that value difference and recognize inequality. Bazerman suggests that the conventions of a genre are shifted by changing the social action or behavior that the genre enforces. If the behavior enforced by the genre is the use of others’ misfortune to highlight one’s own privilege, then this behavior must be shifted. Ultimately, such a shift is multifaceted and involves more stakeholders than just writing instructors. To address what can be done within composition, however, I offer recommendations that might change the behavior associated with the genre.

One way to shift the conventions is to directly teach students about the genre and their potential interaction with it. Instructors can use predeparture assignments and activities to introduce students to the expectation that they will be asked to reflect on their own positionality in complex cultural situations. While predeparture preparation is a best practice within study abroad (Casserly et al.) and has become common at my own institution, the content can veer toward the logistical. Instead, faculty members might create predeparture assignments that ask students to identify the rhetorical moves student writers are expected to make in their public travel writing, perhaps by examining calls for student blogs like the ISEP prompt or student travel writing posted to social media. Both Alyssa and Eric pointed out that they could not explain why they wrote as they did, which suggests they were not aware of the conventions. Asking students to identify and engage with the conventions may help them imagine a fuller range of rhetorical choices as they reflect on their experiences.

Because the focus on overidentification stems from an ideological aversion to unsettlement, faculty should focus on classroom practices that encourage students to write about their discomfort and moral ambiguity. A contemplative approach to writing pedagogy (Wenger) might give students insight into their own subjectivity and also reinforce the time it takes to produce thoughtful writing, both practices that would question the current genre conventions. Traveling with a group is time intensive, and it can be tempting to put off writing until the end of the day or to let students figure out when to write on their own. But leaving students without guidance about how the writing process can support their unsettlement invites the simplified version of reflection presented in the ISEP prompt.⁷ To this end, mindfulness as a pedagogical tool may have a place in troubling the genre expectations, given it makes space for the unsettlement LaCapra describes. An explicitly contemplative approach might draw students into writing as an embodied practice, highlighting a writer's own situatedness. Physically dwelling on student subjectivity can reinforce the importance students place on their own positionality and their writing process, thus making these areas more easily accessible for discussion.

As students discuss and write about their unsettlement, silence and listening as practical pedagogical strategies can help students take more risks in their writing. Shari Stenberg takes up Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening in the classroom by proposing the use of students' own "guilt or defensiveness as an impetus for action and self-reflection" (259). Applied to a study-abroad context, Stenberg's invitation may be enacted by asking students to revise or simply revisit previous written work from the travel experience. Asking Eric to reflect on his narrative about Frau Brenner after our visit to Mauthausen may have prompted him to question his simplification of her narrative. Similarly, a frank class discussion of Alyssa's moment of overidentification in the barracks could have led to a rich, if uncomfortable, discussion about who is allowed to "account for how the past influences the present" (259). With such revision in mind, one might question the utility of publishing work on a blog—why not keep the writing private instead?—but a public display of the unsettlement that revision can bring counteracts the tidy conventions of the genre as it currently stands. Encouraging the risk that comes with listening and responding to one's own privilege undercuts the expectation that study abroad is an experience that simply reinforces that privilege.

Combined with these strategies, a more rhetorical approach to the specific prompts for reflection will encourage students to engage more meaningfully with the sites that are visited. The assignment sheet I coauthored prompted students to "focus on just one thing / event that impacted you during the day" and "do far more than provide your emotional reaction to what you experienced"—for each day, regardless of location. Doing "far more" than providing an emotional

reaction might be an appropriate expectation at the beach but not at a concentration camp. The two sites also differ in tone, which should be observed in the prompts. A better prompt for the beach might have read, “Describe something you didn’t expect to see at our beach day in Sitges: why did this surprise you?” A better prompt for Mauthausen might have asked, “What aspects of the tour at Mauthausen leave you most unsettled?” “From your perspective, what moral or ethical questions did the tour raise?” The prompts for writing about the travel experience, especially those prompts used for published writing, should invite students to respond differently to different rhetorical situations, explore ambiguities, and not default to tidy answers.

Most importantly, in order to shift the social behavior enforced by the blogs away from self-advertisement and toward “genuine conversation” with others, faculty must encourage more meaningful contact between study abroad writers and the people with whom they are trying to identify. As Sharon Crowley has suggested, one way to move forward in challenging rhetorical encounters is to work from “exemplary stories” (198). She cautions rhetors engaged with changing an ideology that new ideas can only be introduced to an audience if there is “common ground” between the audience and rhetor (199). The lead teacher on my own study-abroad experience tried to encourage as much storytelling between students and locals as possible: take, for instance, the meeting between our students and local students at the Islamski Kulturni Centar Bosnjaka. It was a carefully orchestrated afternoon of cooking together, watching a documentary about the Bosnian War, and taking a tour of the center’s mosque. The discussion between the two groups of students grew out of the activities planned for the day; which is to say, the topics were not haphazard. When conversation around the dinner table turned to how the German-Bosnian students experience displacement as a result of the genocide, our students were more able to understand the trauma not from their own lived experience, but from the Bosnians’. Sharing stories allowed them to identify from difference rather than similarity.

These meaningful interactions are themselves a strategy in changing the damaging ideologies that underpin the genre of the study-abroad blog. Crowley argues that actually changing a belief is slow work and begins with introducing “new or countering beliefs” to fundamentalist viewpoints. It is also mindful work, requiring, as Crowley recommends, patience and skill (201). As isolation is a contributing factor to these ideologies, perhaps the best thing one can do to address moments of unethical identification is to facilitate more interaction between students of different lived experiences and find the time and place to reward the unsettlement that comes with recognizing difference. As the composition community extends outward, beyond the university, students must be encouraged to write their relationships with others in ethical ways. To remain

willfully ignorant of the uses of writing in perpetuating study abroad as a venture of privilege is to be complicit in the problem.

NOTES

1. In using the term *victim* I follow the conventions of the Modern Language Association's guide, *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, which uses the term to describe those who died during the Holocaust.

2. Parodies of "voluntourism" speak to the prevalence of white privilege in social media practices related to travel: an *Onion* article titled "6 Day Visit to Rural African Village Completely Changes Woman's Facebook Profile Pic," (2014) mocks narcissistic social media photo conventions; the parody Instagram account @barbiesavior features white Barbie dolls interacting with sites of poverty in Africa; the hashtag #yolocaust unmercifully calls out tourists who take selfies at Holocaust memorial sites (<https://yolocaust.de/>).

3. One of the authors of ISEP's blogroll notes that after launching the ISEP study-abroad blog in 2012, one of her posts, "5 Resume Boosters Hidden in your Study Abroad Photos," garnered "over 3,000 unique views in its first three days, the blog's highest traffic day to date" (Stockley). While this post has since been taken down, a message to the same effect can be seen in Stockley's 2013 presentation at the NAFSA: Association of International Educators conference, titled "Social Media and Study Abroad: A Student's Fame Is Your Gain."

4. In the introduction to *The Handbook of Practice and Research in Study Abroad*, Ross Lewin cites the crowded convention floor of a NAFSA: Association of International Educators conference as evidence for the increasingly crowded market surrounding study abroad: "There are literally hundreds of booths, selling everything from cell phones to security services to study abroad programs. Countries around the globe spend enormous amounts of money erecting elaborate pavilions to advertise their universities as study abroad destinations. American students have become desirable sources of revenue" (xiv).

5. ISEP has since reorganized its website, resulting in the retitling of these links. The new titles, however, also reflect a distinction between home and abroad, as is the case with the post, "The Part of Costa Rica No One Knows Exists"—ISEP's title, not the author's—which positions rural Costa Rica as a pre-industrial paradise discovered by the author ("The Part of Costa Rica").

6. While certainly students carry with them their own traumas of varying magnitudes, reckoning with someone else's traumatic lived experience, especially publicly, can cause discomfort. See Cunningham and O'Halloran & O'Halloran.

7. Pushed to explain her writing in our interview, Alyssa at one point wondered if she was tired when she wrote many of her blog posts or if it was just a "time crunch."

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